



PIONEER HISTORY

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This photo, taken in the early 1970's during a Lowell Labor Day Homecoming Kiddie Parade, shows the Fry's Department Store building in the background. Known as 'the old Opera House,' it was

built in 1894 at the northeast corner of Mill St. and Commercial Ave., and housed the S and T Quality Home Center at the time of the fire which destroyed it in 1976.

From the Three Creeks
Historical Association
By Richard C. Schmal

The northeast corner of Commercial Ave. and Mill St. in Lowell, at one time one of the busiest spots in the downtown area, is now home to a lush, green carpet of grass.

In 1855, only a few years after the founding of Lowell, Pioneer Jonah Thorn moved from his general store in the mill district on Main St. to the new "County Road" to the south, now Commercial Ave. (State Rd. 2). His new hardware store was located where the V.J. Roberts law office is now, at Wall St.

An old story told of several small frame buildings on a low piece of ground there. One of those business houses was a General Store owned by the firm of Spindler and Pletcher.

In 1894, the first large brick building in that area was erected on the corner of Commercial Ave. and Mill St. In its very early days, the structure was known as the "Gregory

Block," built by John Stringer and Gene Mafus, who originally planned a three-story hotel.

After completing two stories, the money ran out, and the partners decided to have an opera house on the second floor. Not long after the building was completed, it was sold to J.M. Castle, owner of a general store on the south side of busy Commercial Ave.

Early in the morning on Tues., Oct. 4, 1898, the citizens of Lowell were awakened from their slumber by the dreaded cry of "Fire!". Flames were first discovered under the hardware store of Haskins and Brannon, on the same site as the earlier Thorn Hardware store, just west of Wall St.

The fire was quickly extinguished by Paul Mahler, who first discovered the flames, and by Hirman Haskins, hardware owner. Haskin returned home to tell his wife that he was going to stand watch at the store for the rest of the night, and upon his return he saw fire in Dr. Bacon's barn to the rear of what is now the Colfax

Masonic Lodge building, then housing George Waters' drug store.

Haskins called the town marshal, and then tried in vain to ring the fire bell. There had been maintenance work done on the bell, and the clapper would not ring.

Finally the townspeople turned out in large numbers, and everyone helped with the bucket brigade. The town's new water system was not yet completed, and no fire hydrants were available, so the main water supply came from the windmill at the Bacon Home and from wells at other nearby homes.

When the heavy smoke cleared, there was nothing remaining but piles of brick and rubble. The fire destroyed buildings on three blocks, burning westward, and was checked only at the "Gregory Block" building at Commercial Ave. and Mill St.

The large brick building was saved by the townspeople with a bucket brigade, wet sacks and blankets on the roof. Rain came

down in torrents during the fire, so they dammed the gutter for an added water supply.

The hard rain also helped save the business buildings on the south side of Commercial Ave., where windows were broken and melted, and walls were scorched.

Because of the fact that the fire was seen in so many places at the same time, it was considered arson, although the culprits were never caught. The largest loss was \$10,000 by the Spindler and Pletcher firm. A fine old photograph of the big fire of 1898 is on display at one of Lowell's restaurants.

The downtown business owners began to rebuild soon after the fire, and it was decided that all buildings would be of masonry construction.

According to the Lake County Directory of 1909, several business enterprises called the building at the corner of Commercial and Mill their home. The old address of 119 W. Commercial Ave., housed a store owned by George Kim-

met, called the "Fair" and advertising "Notions-Fruits."

Next, at 117 W. Commercial, was the large doorway and long, steep stairway that led to the Opera House on the second floor. There were also living quarters upstairs on the west side. Many dances, stage plays, musical concerts, church bazaars and carnivals were held in the large opera house room.

For several years it was used as a court by the Lowell High School basketball team, when the school was at the site of the present Lowell Middle School on Oakley Ave. Even during cold weather, the team would dress for the game at the school, run downtown to practice, and then return again on the run. For a time there was a dressing room on the second floor of another building to the east, the former Grant Bros. Department Store and now B and G Carpet Store.

The popular Lowell High School newspaper in the 1920's, the "Skyrocket," an eight-page tabloid edited and printed by the students, with a variety of columns and advertisements, took up the cause for a new gym: "The need of a new gymnasium."

The most important reason for having a new gym is that we have no decent place to practice. The one in the school is far too small, and the hall downtown is also an unfit place, as it has a low ceiling, and it is very unhealthy, for there is always very much dust in the air. By Kenneth Gordon April 1924."

Next to the stairs, at the address of 115 W. Commercial, the space was occupied by the S.M. LaRue General Store. Thru the years, the big building was used for many types of business.

Joe Eich and Louis Berg both had pool and card rooms there, including a one-lane bowling alley that disturbed the patrons of the Lyric Theatre in the next room. Levi Gard was proprietor of a tavern there, and for many years, the Johnson Bakery ran several delivery trucks from that site. There was also a tailor shop, a resale store, Henry Schreiber's Goodhouse-

keeping Shop, and Esser's Furniture Store.

The large brick building, owned for many years by the heirs of J.M. Castle, was purchased by Earl and Marie Fry in 1954 and used for their department store until the firm moved into their new building on the northcentral edge of Lowell on Morse St. In 1975, the downtown building was sold to Walden Curtis.

The 1894 building escaped another large fire in downtown Lowell in 1902, while several buildings in the block to the west were destroyed or damaged.

But on Sat., Apr. 10, 1976, the cry of "Fire!" was again heard, as several townspeople alerted the Lowell Vol. Fire Dept. at their Annual Fireman's Ball at the nearby Lowell American Legion building of the downtown blaze. The alarm was sounded soon after the dance had begun, and the firefighters began a long night of work. Firefighting units from surrounding communities were called to assist in fighting the big blaze, which was fanned by a strong wind.

The fire was brought under control about 4 a.m., after 88 exhausted firefighters had used over four million gallons of water, operating 16 pieces of fire equipment.

The flames destroyed the building, as well as the stock of

the S and T Quality Home Center owned by Curtis. Also gutted was the second story of Tom Cassman's drug store just north on Mill St. That building was later remodeled into offices for the Lump Ins. Agency and several other businesses.

The drug supplies were a total loss, damaged by fire and water. Roberts law office, constructed in about 1950, suffered some structural damage, and several buildings on the south side of Commercial Ave. were damaged by the heat and smoke.

That lush, green carpet of grass on the corner of Commercial Ave. and Mill St., once the site of the proud Opera House building, is now used each year for the sale of Christmas trees by the busy Lowell Lions Club, with proceeds given to a local charity.

The Three Creeks Historical Assn. invites everyone to attend their annual picnic on Sat., Aug. 15. It will take place at noon at the Diamond Farm on Chestnut Rd. in West Creek Twp.

Bring a covered dish, table service, and a friend. Coffee will be furnished. Plan to spend a pleasant day on the farm with hosts Ray and Helen McIntire.

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